

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Straight A's: The Academic Achievement for All Act

H.R. 2300

How Straight A's Works

Q. Can states choose whether or not they participate in Straight A's?

- Yes. States may choose to participate in Straight A's or they can continue to administer their education programs the old way.

Q. How does a state participate in Straight A's?

- For states that choose to participate, they would draft a 5-year performance agreement and submit it to the Secretary of Education for approval.

Q. Is Straight A's a block grant?

- No. With Straight A's, all the federal elementary and secondary education programs remain in place. No program is repealed, consolidated, or folded into a block grant.

Q. How is Straight A's different from revenue sharing or block grants?

- Under Straight A's the federal government acts as an investor, not the CEO, of education in a state. To ensure a good return on its investment, performance accountability strings are attached to funds under Straight A's. The money that goes to the states is conditional upon the state showing increases in academic achievement, for all groups of students.
- Under Straight A's, if you don't meet the academic performance goals for all groups of students, you cannot continue in the program.

Q. Won't states lose funds that have been targeted to address certain needs, such as technology?

- No. Under Straight A's, states could focus increased funding on proven reforms that work for their students. Any successful endeavor under current law could be continued.

Q. Does Straight A's repeal any Federal education program?

- No. Instead, it allows states—like Texas and North Carolina---that have focused their efforts on improving academic results, to opt out of extraneous paperwork and process requirements unrelated to performance.

Q. What about giving school districts the Straight A's option?

- If a state chooses not to participate in Straight A's, then school districts could participate separately if the state agrees. Several large school districts, such as Chicago, have already indicated interest.

Q. What financial incentive does Straight A's offer to improve student performance and narrow achievement gaps?

- If a state closes its achievement gap of disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students by 25% over its 5-year agreement term, then they would be eligible for reward funds from the Secretary of Education.
- If a state makes little or no progress towards meeting its performance goals, in addition to being disqualified from participating in Straight A's, it will lose 50 percent of its administrative funds for these programs.

Straight A's and Ed-Flex

Q. How is Straight A's different from Ed-Flex?

- **Ed-Flex** enables federal programs to work better for particular schools and districts. It grants states the authority to approve local requests to waive federal program requirements in order to remove obstacles to implementing effective education reform strategies. The multiple federal education programs along with their requirements and priorities remain intact at the local level regardless of how well they address the particular needs.
- **Straight A's** would give states freedom to use their federal program dollars to raise student achievement, without all of the restrictions and requirements that accompany multiple separate federal education programs. It takes away process requirements and requires gains in student achievement instead. It does this by allowing states and localities to combine their separate categorical program dollars to fund effective state education programs designed to improve student performance and narrow achievement gaps..

Q. Shouldn't we wait for states to take advantage of Ed-Flex before moving ahead on Straight A's?

- **No.** Straight A's and Ed-Flex are two completely different pieces of legislation designed to address different problems.
- **Ed-Flex** will play a vital role in many states as they approve local waivers to make federal programs work for them.
- **Straight A's** is for states and communities who are ready and who want the freedom to use federal dollars to address their own priorities such as raising teacher quality, ending social promotion, and closing achievement gaps. Ed-Flex waivers are not designed to do that. Moreover, we already know Ed-Flex works based upon the pilot program started in 1994. And the past 30 years of laws have substantially failed to help the neediest children improve academically. We can't wait any longer. Governor Engler, several State Superintendents of Education, and many others say they can benefit right now from having the Straight A's option.

Q. Ed-Flex was tested as a demonstration program before it was expanded for all states. How has Straight A's been tested?

- The kind of accountability in Straight A's has worked well in cities such as Chicago and states such as Texas. In both places, a system of accountability has helped officials to zero in on students and schools that have fallen behind and uncover the reasons for their failure.
- Straight A's acknowledges and taps into what has been tested at the state level – its purpose is to fund what works.
- Not every state would want to or even necessarily be able to participate in Straight A's, so the program is limited.

Accountability

Q. How does Straight A's hold states accountable?

- In their agreement they would need to demonstrate their state accountability system is rigorous and that it holds local schools and districts accountable for closing racial and economic achievement gaps.
- States are required to hold schools and districts accountable for turning around low performing schools.
- States are required to set performance goals and meet them within the five year term of the agreement. A state's performance goals must include goals to reduce economic and racial achievement gaps.

Q. How does Straight A's hold states more accountable for performance than current law?

- In Title I, states and school districts have to show they are in compliance with the law, regardless of whether that produces gains in student achievement.
- Title I dollars flow to states regardless of how well a state improves achievement.
- States lose their flexibility in 5 years if they do not meet their goals, and in three years if their student performance declines for three years in a row. States and school districts are rewarded if they significantly improve achievement and narrow achievement gaps.
- One of the central components of Straight A's is a focus on closing achievement gaps – a focus not in current law.
- Right now Title I allows states to hide behind state averages, which do not reveal the achievement gaps that exist in every state. Straight A's changes that by requiring states to hold districts and schools accountable for improving the achievement of all students, particularly disadvantaged students.
- Straight A's provides rewards for states that close these gaps by at least 25 percent in two content areas. Nothing in current law specifically rewards narrowing achievement gaps.
- It cuts administrative funds for states that fail to improve the achievement of their students during the term of the performance agreement.

Targeting Disadvantaged Students and High Poverty School Districts

Q. How do you ensure that money continues to reach poor school districts?

- Under Straight A's, school districts are guaranteed to receive at a minimum the amount of Title I funds they received the year before entering into their performance agreement.
- States participating in Straight A's must set and report achievement objectives for all segments of the student population. They must set performance goals to close achievement gaps down to the school level. Consequently, states will no longer be able to hide behind paperwork and state averages to give the impression that they are serving the lowest-achieving students -- they must show results.

Q. How will it help poor children?

- Thirty years of Washington-based bureaucracies have resulted in the neediest students being left behind. Straight A's would change that pattern by holding states strictly accountable for academic increases for all groups of students, particularly disadvantaged students.
- States are free to target dollars to high poverty areas even more than required under current law. Under Straight A's states could use all of their federal dollars for this purpose, potentially increasing spending under the current Title I appropriations by 70 percent, which is \$5 billion.

Q. Why should we trust states to produce results?

- The most dynamic forces in school reform today are states and localities. In order to participate in Straight A's states must have shown a strong commitment to accountability. Further, almost every state is working to raise the achievement of its students -- especially its poor students.
- Even the Clinton Administration has pointed to Texas and North Carolina as examples of states closing the achievement gap of their lowest performing students. In addition, two thirds of the states now boast charter schools, most of which are focused on the needs of the poor and underserved.
- Almost every state is working to raise teacher standards. Thirty-six states publish report cards on their schools. And every state in the nation is working to raise academic standards for their students. Should we hand over the money with no strings attached? No. Can we trust the states to do right by poor children? Yes. We should trust but verify. That's what Straight A's does.

Straight A's and the President's Proposal

Q. How does this compare to the Clinton Administration's Elementary and Secondary Education Act proposal?

- The Clinton proposal is all about top-down bureaucratic rules and requirements -- telling you what your school report card must look like, what kind of discipline policy you must have, and what your social promotion policy should be. Straight A's is all about freedom and accountability for academic results.
- The Clinton Plan is business as usual, and fails to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged students. Straight A's is about guaranteed results for all groups of students and closing the achievement gap.